Corbyn’s Defeat and the Democratic Socialists of America

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We in DSA, the Democratic Socialists of America, will have to be able to understand and explain this: Boris Johnson and the Conservative Party won the British general election by a landslide, defeating Labour’s Jeremy Corbyn largely because they broke the “Red Wall” of working class votes in northern Britain’s old industrial region. The region, sometimes compared to the American “rust belt” in the Northeast and Midwest, has seen employment, labor unions, and the standard of living all decline, together with morale. The working class in Britain rejected Corbyn, Labour, and socialism. What does this mean for DSA’s support for Democratic Party candidate Bernie Sanders?

Boris Johnson’s landslide victory over Jeremy Corbyn—43.6% to 32.%—raises important questions for the Democratic Party, for its left candidates Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren, but perhaps especially for Democratic Socialists of America (DSA). DSA was transformed by the thousands of young people who joined between 2015 when Bernie Sanders announced his candidacy and 2016 when Donald Trump won the U.S. presidential election. Sanders became DSA’s standard bearer and DSA members developed a special affection for Jeremy Corbyn, seeing him as the British version of DSA’s hero Sanders.

At the 2017 DSA Convention where a Corbyn surrogate spoke, those in the front of the hall broke out singing “Oh, Jeremy Corbyn” to the White Stripes’ song “Seven Nation Army.” DSA members established close ties to Momentum, the left-wing caucus within the Labour Party that backed Corbyn. One group within DSA even called itself Momentum (later changing its name to Bread and Roses). In late 2019 DSA officially endorsed Corbyn and some DSA members pledged to go to Britain to work on his campaign. *Jacobin,* DSA’s unofficial online publication, and its British affiliate *Tribune,* ran rafts of articles about Corbyn, partisan, uncritical, and expecting great things from Corbyn and perhaps even victory.

Many in DSA, like many in Momentum in Britain, believed that Corbyn would do well in the election that has just taken place and might even win, and in their political imaginations many DSA members

linked Corbyn's presumed victory to the coming triumph of their champion Bernie Sanders. They saw both Corbyn and Sanders fighting for socialism, or more realistically for a revival of social democracy in Britain and of the New Deal in America and winning. The two leftist candidates British and American both put forward political platforms that emphasized social programs: health care, education, housing, and the like. Corbyn and the Labour Party adopted a radical "Manifesto" that called for taxing the rich by another US$107 billion to pay for the nationalization of industries and for universal social programs. DSA and Momentum members believed that the program was the key to victory. It was not. Corbyn, the Labour Party, and the Manifesto spoke directly to the needs and interests of the British working class—but the working class turned its back on them.

Erosion of Democracy Was Not the Issue

With Corbyn's defeat, DSA National Political Committee (NPC) published an expression of solidarity and sympathy for British Labour Party comrades but without much reflection or analysis. DSA's explanation for the defeat is found here:

> Labour's loss does not mean that socialist politics are unpopular or unnecessary in this moment. Rather, this loss reflects the ongoing erosion of democracy at the hands of the ruling class and the shutting-out of the working class from the rooms where its own fate is determined.

For a group that emphasizes the importance of democracy, this is a very strange explanation. Boris Johnson and the Conservative Party just won an election in which 31,897,334 British citizens voted, representing 67.23 percent of eligible voters, down just 1.5 percent from the 2017 election. So if there is an erosion of democracy taking place it is not in the electoral arena. And those more than two-thirds of British citizens who voted cast their ballots against socialist politics, which suggests that indeed socialism is unpopular or at least not popular enough to win votes.

"Erosion of democracy" is an odd explanation because for months Momentum and other Labourites were expecting Corbyn to do well, and if he had done well or even won, they surely would have claimed that as a victory for democracy and for themselves. We might note that British elections are more democratic than U.S. elections. While the corporate media plays an enormous role in British election, corporate financing is not as significant. The erosion of democracy was not the principal issue in the Labour defeat.

The problem is that in this democratic election British citizens were less moved by Corbyn's economic program than by Boris Johnson's nationalist position. It was Brexit, the question of staying in or leaving the European Union, that gave nationalism a major opportunity. The battle was fought out for three exhausting years between the bourgeois globalizers who wanted to stay in the EU and the bourgeois nationalists who wanted to leave—while Corbyn and Labour never clearly took a side and never found an attractive alternative. So Johnson and the nationalists, taking advantage of middle-class and working class anger about the country's decline, won the election. Nationalism tinged with nostalgia, the promise to defend Britons, the historic white Britons, not only represented a rejection of the European Union, but was also an expression of the growth of racism and xenophobia among the British population, including the working class. Boris Johnson, with his record of racist and sexist remarks, personally embodied the racist politics of his nationalist program.

The Alternative is Class Struggle

The British Labour Party, much like the Democratic Party, has not found a strategy for challenging

and defeating a demagogue with a nationalist politics that appeals to racism and xenophobia. The problem is that the alternative is not a leftist political program and more canvassers, as Momentum and Labour learned. The alternative is a higher level of class struggle so that working people begin to see themselves and their movement as actually having the power to influence politics. When there is class struggle and a demonstration of working class power that can (but does not necessarily) provide a powerful alternative to racist nationalism. And neither a candidate like Corbyn, nor a caucus like Momentum, nor a political party like Labour can determine the level of class struggle, though when it happens they can influence its direction and provide it with a set of objectives.

The level of class struggle in Great Britain has been until very recently at its lowest level since the 1890s, though there was a small uptick in 2019 with strikes on the railroads and in the universities. If there is no working class movement, then workers cannot see and understand a political party and a candidate as giving expression to their movement, because they don't have a movement. And a political campaign, while it may take on some of the characteristics of a movement with marches and rallies, really has nothing in common with the demonstration of class power that one finds in a strike that shuts down an industry. Only a real working-class movement that demonstrates power can provide the social weight to lead a political movement that will change society. The problem for us socialists is that we cannot make class struggle happen on a mass scale, we can only attempt to bring our politics to it when it happens.

Clearly, if one accepts this analysis, there are serious implications in the United States for the Democrats and for DSA. After the late 1980 recession, American working class militancy declined dramatically for almost forty years, though we have recently seen an uptick with the inspiring teachers' strikes of 2018 and the more recent teachers' strikes in Chicago and Los Angeles in 2019. Inspiring as they are, these strikes have been, they do not represent a general working-class movement.

The private sector has in recent years seen few strikes, though this year there was a pretty big exception, the UAW strike against General Motors, where 45,000 workers struck for six weeks. This was not an inspiring movement, however; the union leadership was being investigated by the FBI for corruption, the strike was not well prepared or executed, and the contract was disappointing. While some rank-and-file members criticized the contract there was little rank-and-file organization and certainly not enough to challenge the leadership. As Kim Moody wrote recently, we've just remembered how to strike and, I would add, the working class needs a lot more practice. The point is that, as in Great Britain, we have a left-wing "socialist" candidate who has what for our times is a radical New Deal program—but we don't yet have a working-class movement that might find itself reflected in Sanders, his program, and the Democrats.

If Sanders Loses

DSA meetings often begin or end with people chanting, "I believe that we will win." Presumably this means that one day socialism will be victorious, but it also applies to DSA's candidate Bernie Sanders. DSA members want Bernie Sanders to win and they work for his victory in the Democratic Party primary, and in that campaigning mode have not by and large been prepared to think, talk, or write about the possibility that Bernie Sanders may lose, no doubt because entertaining thoughts of defeat while campaigning for victory seems some how to be disloyal. If the thought of Sanders defeat is entertained, it is principally to argue that DSA should not support any other Democrat. In fact the DSA Convention of 2019 adopted such a position. The point of this, which is important, is to keep DSA from becoming again what it once was, a ginger group within the Democratic Party. Still, if Sanders loses, this position does not prepare DSA members to face the future.

Clearly, since the organization grew with Sanders from a few thousand to 56,000, there is an

understandable fear that its membership might just as dramatically decline if he loses. While DSA has lots of other irons in the fire, from local political campaigns to organizing around a wide variety of issues from feminism and racism to the environment and from to rank-and-file labor organizing and work on immigration, it is Sanders that has provided the group with its idealistic, optimistic, and uncharismatically charismatic figure. His figure and politics have largely glued DSA together.

Yet, we know that the American capitalist class and the corporate media hate Sanders and what he stands for, as does the entire political establishment, including the Democratic Party leadership, which loathes him. From the beginning, a Sanders victory has been a long shot. Corbyn's defeat does not necessarily mean that Sanders will be defeated, but we in America face the same central problem as the British. We do not have a level of class struggle that might propel Sanders to the presidency together with a large number of Democrats into the House and Senate, which is the only way that he could affect the political direction of America.

We find ourselves in the uncomfortable position—not so uncommon for socialists at different periods over the last 170 years since the *Communist Manifesto*—of having to recognize that the working class is not yet prepared to act on its own. We will continue organizing and fighting for our politics in the labor and social movements, while waiting for the event that will trigger the eruption of the mass movement without which our politics have no vehicle.